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JAMES MCNEILL WHISTLER.

BY JOSEPH PENNELL.

THE greatest artist of modern times is dead. These are strong words, and I mean them to be. If the time has not come to discuss and analyze the art and the personality of James McNeill Whistler, it is none too soon to state facts and to state them as strongly as they can be stated. For, ere he was in his grave, many of those who, a few days before, had cringed after years of toadying turned, as is their nature, to revile him. Many of those whose mouths he had shut opened them rudely again; and yet scarcely a voice has been raised in his defence, even in his praise.

Among the few artists the world over the man was known, revered and honored. No one since Velasquez and Rembrandt has had such an effect on the art of the world. And not alone by the graphic arts will he live, but by what he wrote and by what he said. There is no one who has carried on the traditions of English literature of the days of Elizabeth and James, as this man has done, in one book. Nor is that all. As a patriot, as an American, it would be hard to find his peer, and yet he scarcely ever was in his native land. In his painting, the man was the heir of the masters. Though he never looked on Velasquez, in all his glory, at Madrid, nothing of the great Spaniard was hid from him. He was nearly fifty before he knew Italy, and even then it was only the fringe of Italy he knew. But what had it to show him? Holland he had worked in; still it was not until a summer or so ago that he studied its art. But the man knew everything almost before he saw it. The merest suggestion of a great work taught him more than the average student can learn by ten years of copying, and, like the truly great, he rarely copied anything. He had no time for it, no use for it.

After a year or two of study at West Point and of work in the Coast Survey at Washington, after a year or two of training at Gleyre's in Paris—and all had their effect—he painted the *White Girl* and the *Piano Picture*, he etched the *French Series* and the *Thames Set*. And they are immortal. From that time till yesterday, he triumphed. If he did not, where is the failure? There were failures, and there are unfinished works, but they have not been seen, and I hope they will not be seen. Between the *White Girl* and the crowd of pictures which are yet to dazzle the world—a world knowing nothing of them—is but the change wrought by never-ending development. Every phase of genuine contemporary art interested and impressed him, at times influenced him; that of Courbet directly, of Rossetti momentarily, of Hiroshige and Hokusai immensely. With it all, however, there was only one end in view, and that was great art and the carrying on of great traditions. He knew he was making great art. He was so sure of it that, even during his lifetime, he compelled an unwilling public to admit it. But for those of us of the younger generation, it is impossible to understand this compulsion. As a schoolboy, my first strong impressions of painting came from the *Portrait of his Mother*, shown in the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, and the *White Girl* in the Metropolitan Museum of New York; and of etching when I first saw his prints in the Claghorn collection. There was no question of acceptance. I had to acknowledge them. Yet I learn now, even to-day, from the British critics, for whose existence he saw no necessity, that though Whistler thought subject was nothing, and pathos was nothing and sentiment was nothing, yet he put all these into the portrait of the person he loved best—his mother; and the critics say, even Swinburne has said, he contradicted his theories. He proved them. As well be surprised at dignity in Michelangelo, or craftsmanship in Frans Hals. But then one is always surprised at common sense in anything connected with British art-criticism. Why should the critics understand, and what does it matter? And now, a quarter of a century later, we read Ruskin with astonishment, and learn with amazement the standards of that high priest of British art. For there was no explanation of the shriek by which he will live—the coxcomb throwing a pot of paint in the public face. For upon the few inches of canvas which contained this masterpiece is all the beauty and the mys-

tery of the East wedded to all the mystery and beauty of the West—the work of a master whose like the world has never seen. But because he put sentiment in his portrait of his mother and beauty in the nocturnes, he is absurd. To the critic, certainly!

There is one phase of Whistler's art, however, which the critics, especially in Britain, never weary of asserting that they did appreciate, his etchings. Doubtless; but the fact remains that until he, looking farther into futurity than any of them, made these etchings valuable from the only point of view from which art works are considered—the financial one—they could be bought, and mainly were bought by artists, up to a few years ago, for fewer shillings than pounds are now offered. It may be interesting to remember that it was of one of the Venice etchings, the "Nocturne, Riva," a celebrated critic said the "subject did not admit of any drawing."

In speaking of the "Wool Carders," another remarked, "they have a merit of their own, and I do not wish to understand it." That has an honest ring; it is a monumental record which can never be lived down. But, as if that were not enough, the same gentleman defined his position as critic by saying that Whistler was an artist who had "never mastered the subtleties of form." No wonder that for years this critic has been trying to deny his past. To crown all, a Professor of Art, an authority on prints, found in the "Rialto" but "scampering caprice," and in the "Salute, Dawn" that Whistler had "pushed a single artistic principle to the verge of affectation." Again, in summing up the Venetian prints, they were pronounced "disastrous failures"; "failures that are complete and failures that are partial"; that have gained "a publicity rarely bestowed upon failures at all." Such an awful failure of critical faculty was never exhibited before even in England, yet this did not prevent one of the critics from cataloguing the prints; he was "refreshed . . . with money" for it, however, he says himself. These are the opinions of the people who praised Mr. Whistler's etchings when they were published. This was the praise bestowed upon them, one of the most favorable comments upon the Venice being that they were "another crop of Mr. Whistler's little jokes."

It is a popular superstition that Whistler was accepted in France. Until 1883, he was treated rather worse, officially, in France than in England, and it is only this year that, sending to

Budapest, he found himself carefully ignored. Success for him meant a fight in every country for recognition.

As to Mr. Whistler's paintings there was little attempt to take them seriously. There is but little more now. It is a fact that, until within the last five or six years, his commissions for portraits could be counted upon the fingers of one hand, and it is also a fact that, since that time, it would be difficult to count those life was too short for him to carry out, which mostly came from America. There were, I think, only two English ones. Why was it, he himself said, if people now clamored for his work, they refused it when he would have been glad to let them have it? Was it better? No. It is a question of fashion, but this is one of the fashions that will not change. Rembrandt has not changed, and Velasquez has not changed, and Whistler will not change. For genius was the portion of these three artists, and immortality is their reward; and if only one of them—Velasquez—was wholly successful in his life, they have left a heritage which will never die.

I know that it is not the fashion to write like this. I know that one should be calm and judicial and anæmic—that is, one should be a coward, and a craven, and afraid to say what one believes. But, when the world was young, those who discovered it, and made its history, and fought its battles, and ruled its peoples, did what their hands found to do with all their heart, and all their soul, and all their might; and so did this great man throughout his life. With Whistler, painting, when he was painting, was the only thing to live for. When he fought, he meant to fight, and it was with the most wonderful rapier, which none could withstand. When he wrote, those who could read stopped to hear his message. But no longer is it the fashion to paint like that, nor to fight like that, nor to write like that. The man who can paint so well hurts too many mediocrities, and mediocrities are always official and in power. The man who fences so well kills his rival; he does not fail to touch him, and then shake hands. And the man who writes as Whistler wrote is neither forgotten nor forgiven. So, from out their holes, are crawling already the official ones of art, and saying: "It is just as well we did not make him one of us; we do not know what he might have done." And the critical ones, though killed, are now reviving, and are no longer so cowardly as to be afraid to jeer at him, no matter how

much they toadied a few weeks ago. The so-called literary tributes offered him in England are little but a tissue of jeers and sneers and taunts and lies, which, later, will only, as they have before, recoil upon their utterers; and few dare to admit the greatness of the man and artist. All hesitate, lest some day, sooner or later, if they do not hedge, the world might call them fools. They cannot realize the seriousness of Whistler. Because he was so serious, because he was so honest and strong, they think he must have been a fraud, and that they—it does not matter what happens to him!—will be made ridiculous if they praise. They cannot realize that he was as stern as he was great in his painting, his fighting, and his writing. No one paints or writes or fights so honestly nowadays, and therefore they fear that he was only playing with them, only fooling them. But some of us know that no greater honor could come to us in this world than to find ourselves working, or fighting, or writing on his side.

Not merely with his brush and his needle did he struggle for art. He fought for a great federation of the arts, when exhibitions should be for artists and not for intriguers, when artists and not politicians should be judges. And in this, as in everything, he worked for art. Where is the politician who has not the dread of his voters before him? How many authors are there who do not think of their readers?

But Whistler thought of art and the future of it, and if many never understood him at all, and fewer with difficulty, it was because his ideals were so great and his methods so subtle, though so clear to himself, that, at times, he had to explain them even to those who believed most truly in him. I do not mean to say that he did not make mistakes; he did, as every one does. At times he was taken in by charlatans, and, at others, "acted as though he was not a genius," Degas once said of him in despair. His aims were far beyond those of the unworthy association with which he allowed himself to be allied some years ago. But, later, as the President of another body, the International Society of Sculptors, Painters, and Gravers, he made his ideal known and his power felt from one end of the artistic world to the other; and some of his younger followers may live to see him acknowledged, not only for what they know him to be now, the master, but as the founder of a great world-wide art movement, which will influence art and artists everywhere.

In literature, too, his influence for style and for truth has been enormous. Not only was he the first, nearly fifty years ago, to paint the beauty of London, but in that masterpiece, the "Ten O'clock," he preached it later to a crowd that came to jeer and went away to praise, and to imitate. Who before had seen the wonder of night, or the splendor of fog, or the mystery of twilight in London? Now none can avoid it; yet who remembers that it was he who revealed it? It is the fashion for writers to say that Rossetti was a painter, and for painters to say that Rossetti was a poet. But the future will acknowledge that Whistler was both. For, just as he knew how to paint and to etch because he knew the science and traditions of those arts, so he knew how to write because his writing was founded on the immortal works of the past. In painting and in writing, he carried on scientifically the great tradition, and this is all the great artist has ever done. Never was there less of an innovator, an iconoclast, or a sensationalist, though those are the mildest terms applied to him. He was the humble student of all time and all tradition, who used the knowledge of a lifetime in the service of his art.

This is not the time or place to defend him from his enemies, or to slay them. The future will do that. But there is one phase of his life which should at this very moment be referred to—his patriotism, his Americanism. He was the most intensely American of Americans, continuously reviled though he is by being called an Anglo-American, a Franco-American: impossible hybrids. Whistler was an American and nothing else. His ideals were American, his ambition was for America. And yet, because he did not live in Skaneateles or Kalamazoo, or even in New York or Boston, because it so happened that he found his first motives in London, as well as his last, because his most intimate friends were in that city, he and some other people, with him, who also love England because of what it gives them in their art, are virtually denounced as traitors to the land of their birth and of their fathers' birth, mainly, it is true, by people who were not even born there. But though Whistler passed almost all his life in England and but a few years in France, in those few years, however, learning all there was to learn, he was not of France, though he was in it, nor was he of England either. He followed American affairs with the feelings and the emotions of a patriot. His early training was that of a New England schoolboy, and his

standards of right and wrong and of conduct were those of the West Point of his time, while not a little of his devotion to details was gained in the United States Coast Survey. In all the important American movements of the last few years, schemes for empire, the question of the blacks, everything that concerns the American, his interest was boundless,—the interest of the real American, not of the sentimentalist or the politician. The sooner the American nation can understand that this great man was one of those who are compelled to live out of their country by their profession, their business, or their trade, though they may love their land, care more for it, and do more for it, than those who never stir beyond the borders of their own ward, the broader will be the American outlook. The American appreciation which came to him from America was always a delight, and his friends were nearly all Americans. At any rate, they were not Englishmen; and if some of them live in London they no more than he are of it. It is true that to-day England, with the sense of appropriation which has always been hers, is ready enough to speak of him as an English artist. He was in no sense an English artist; English artists never did one single thing for him during his life nor since his death; nor English collectors either, save to unload at advanced prices, his works they possessed—luckily, and as he wished, to Americans.

He had no interest in British art, save that which is above nationality, like Hogarth's. And near Hogarth he now sleeps. Had England appreciated these two artists, both would have been buried in St. Paul's. His only sympathy with England was because of the things he found there, and because of the friends he had there. For him, blood was not thicker than water, and sentimental and shop-keeping politics did not make international alliances. He cared far more for France. But he cared most of all for America. And though he has built for himself a fame that will never die, it is time America recognized that this great man has triumphantly placed her first and foremost among the artistic nations of the world. No tribute that can be bestowed upon him by the United States will be too great for his glory, nor fail to redound with honor upon his native land.

JOSEPH PENNELL.